## East County officials, nonprofit agency heads discuss dire state of social safety net

By Hilary Costa East County Times

Posted: 02/02/2009 04:34:03 PM PST

Contra Costa Housing Authority Executive Director Joseph Villareal brought home how crucial the county's shrinking safety net is at a summit of East County nonprofit and social service leaders Monday at Los Medanos College in Pittsburg.

Two people recently threatened to kill themselves if they didn't get housing help, Villareal said.

"There is a level of desperation I've just not heard in the past," he said at the East County State of the Safety Net meeting called by Supervisor Federal Glover.

Other social service workers echoed Villareal's concerns about the increasingly dire circumstances plaguing many and the simultaneous funding cuts several county agencies and nonprofit groups are facing.

Contra Costa County's Employment and Human Services Department saw a 59 percent increase in social service applications in January, and East County has been ground zero for that demand, Executive Director Joe Valentine said.

Nearly half of the agency's applicants are from East County, he said, pointing to the region's high foreclosure rate as one of many contributing factors.

At the same time, the county's budget has been slashed by \$90 million, and officials will have to cut \$56 million more in the next 15 months.

"There will be cuts in programs; there will be layoffs at the county level," county Administrator David Twa said. "The question is how deep the cuts will be."

Nearly 20 nonprofit directors, hoping their pleas would be carried back to the board of supervisors and legislators on the state and federal levels, explained the services their groups provide and the human consequences of cutting funding. More students dropping out of school as well as higher levels of child abuse, elder abuse and domestic violence were some of the forecast repercussions.

"We may not be in Iraq, but we are at war," said Antioch Center for Human Development's Anita Marquez, drawing a round of applause.

Susie Dove, director of Antioch's Rivertown Resource Center, said calls to her crisis line have shot up 126 percent since October. She urged utility companies and other stakeholders to get involved in helping bridge the gap between need and services. The nonprofit groups scrambling to aid people can't do it alone, she said.

"We have been hit the hardest, but we are doing all the work to help these families," Dove said.

Following the meeting, Glover said he would advise the board of supervisors of its outcomes as the board begins to decide on further budget cuts.

"We heard the cry for help, we heard the impacts that we're seeing within the community, and a clear picture of what it's going to look like as we make cuts," he said.